

# The Church as a partner for HIV Prevention: A model for engaging the church in HIV/AIDS prevention special focus on adolescents

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## Abstract

### Objectives:

To develop a model for working with faith institutions to respond individually and collectively to reproductive health needs of adolescents in their congregations.

### Design and Methods:

In late 2000, Youth.now (the Jamaica Adolescent Reproductive Health Project) supported a series of individual consultations with leaders of church organisations and a 3-day Curriculum Development Workshop (CDW) to adapt a prototype Christian Family Life Education (CFLE) resource guide to the Jamaican context. Three one-week training workshops were conducted over 18 months for pastors and church leaders. Graduates were provided with a resource guide and technical and financial assistance to plan and conduct training and other interventions with adolescents and youth.

### Results:

Sixty pastors and church leaders were trained as trainers and facilitators in CFLE. Graduates have used the training in varied ways. Many have conducted training workshops for other pastors, youth leaders and Sunday school teachers. Two pastors introduced adolescent reproductive health (ARH) modules into the curricula of two bible colleges. One pastor has established a website to strengthen networking among the graduates. A group of highly motivated graduates formed the Pastors' Coordinating Committee and later the National Christian Youth Coalition, co-sponsor of the November 2003 Pastors' Conference on ARH. A 2-day conference for graduates and participants in the CDW was held in November 2003 to agree on the way forward for churches to respond to ARH.

### Conclusions:

The tension that exists between the faith and health communities can be bridged and churches actively engaged as partners in the prevention of HIV, especially for adolescents.

## Introduction

In Jamaica, some of the estimated 500,000 adolescents, are determined to formulate a sense of identity and self-worth and are directing their energies, assets, creativity and skills into fulfilling promise and purpose for their lives. Many more, however, continue to face difficult social and health issues including peer pressure, low self esteem, difficulties in relationships, pregnancy, drug addiction, suicide, depression, decisions about their sexual orientation, sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV and AIDS. 21% of live births in 2001 were to females under 19 years; 69% of adolescents do not think they can get HIV or sexually transmitted infection (STIs), but 40% of syphilis and 50% of gonorrhoea cases in 2000 were to adolescents; 1 out of 4 adolescents has contracted an STI, and HIV infection rates are increasing faster among females 10 – 24. (Ministry of Health, 2002).

Youth.now, a five-year programme implemented by Futures for the Ministry of Health (MoH), Jamaica, promotes healthy reproductive health choices and effects positive behaviour development and change in Jamaican adolescents using a holistic approach. This approach views each adolescent in his or her totality, takes into account the relationship between reproductive health (RH) choices and other influential factors within the individual's spiritual, social, cultural, economic and political environment and acknowledges that the environment includes the home, school, church, community and broader society. This paper analyses Youth.now's experience working with the church to address the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) concerns, especially HIV/AIDS, of adolescents.

The church in Jamaica has a strong influence on the sexual attitudes and behaviours of its members. It also has a dominant role in defining social norms, many of which are premised on moral values that promote family relationships in the context of marriage. There is an acknowledged reticence among the various denominations to deal with the matter of HIV/AIDS and the related issues of sex and sexuality. The Church has never been comfortable with questions of sexuality. Even though many distinguished theologians and others within the church may take a more liberal approach to issues of morality, the dominant doctrinal religious pedagogy remains, at the core, fundamentalist. The challenge for public health programmes that desire to work with the church is how to overcome the tension – to bridge the gap between a practiced theology and a lived social reality. Practically, how can the community of faith move to reflect on its perceptions of sex as taboo, to reflect on its role as agent of social change and assume a proactive role in the prevention of HIV/AIDS. As one Anglican priest observes:

"It's (HIV/AIDS) something that is staring us right in the face and we just have to face it sooner or later because if we do not do that the consequences could be very serious later on."

He also says,

"It's all about prevention and I think preventing teenage pregnancy, preventing HIV/AIDS. But is also has a positive spin because it is about people recognizing their sexuality and the gift that God has given them and learning to appreciate it within the right context."

## The Model - Theory of Action

A broad conceptual theory of action for Youth.now's work with the church to influence adolescent reproductive health is presented as Figure 1.

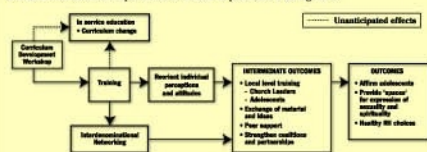


Figure 1: Theory of Action for Youth.now's intervention with the Church

### Unanticipated effects

The theory of action seeks to affirm adolescents and create spaces to express their sexuality and spirituality in an honest, open environment by re-orienting the perceptions of pastors and youth ministers about sexuality. The idea was to first engage with theologians from seminaries, bible colleges, youth ministries and a regional ecumenical organisation to adapt a prototype Christian Family Life Education (CFLE) resource guide to suit the spiritual, social and cultural peculiarities and specificities of Jamaica. The CFLE material would then be used to train pastors and church youth ministers in CFLE. Church leaders agree that the material is not new. What is new is that the material is drawn together in one place and the issues are presented in a biblical context.

The primary influence of the intervention is on the behaviour of pastors themselves, while the secondary influence is the impact on adolescent congregants' knowledge, attitudes, practices and beliefs. Youth.now provided technical and other support to trained pastors to develop and implement RH Education and Communication programmes for their church congregations.

## The Intervention

60 pastors and church leaders were trained as trainers and facilitators in CFLE between February 2001 and March/April 2003. Five were trained as master trainers. Prior to graduation, all 60 trainees were assessed while conducting a 15-minute session on a CFLE topic of their choice; 10 graduates were observed conducting a session in CFLE post-training; 10 were observed as they facilitated sessions in sexuality and related issues during workshops conducted by experienced project staff. 3 graduates participated in an overseas study tour of adolescent SRH programmes in the USA.

## The Assessment - Method

Two years and six months after the first training workshop (three months after the third), the effect of the intervention on church leaders was assessed. A qualitative design combining three methods of data collection:

- depth interviews with trained pastors;
- observation of graduates of the training programme conducting or facilitating training and other interactions on CFLE; and
- request data from the project's request database was used.

The choice of a qualitative approach provided contextual understanding (Steckler, et al, 1992) of results of the intervention as well as generated rich, detailed process data. Data were validated through triangulation of three methods and the data from each of the sources.

## Results/Outcomes:

Graduates of the 3 basic training workshops have used the CFLE training in varied ways that indicate their commitment to changing the paradigm of CFLE.

- The majority conducted training workshops for other pastors, youth leaders and Sunday school teachers.
- 2 pastors introduced ARH modules into the curricula of two bible colleges.
- 1 pastor has established a website to strengthen networking among the graduates.
- A group of highly motivated graduates formed the Pastors' Coordinating Committee and later the National Christian Youth Coalition, co-sponsor of the November 2003 conference of pastors.

### Developing Capacity

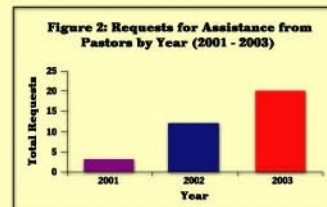
#### i) Local Level

Graduates use the CFLE manual and the skills developed to train a range of key influencers in their respective churches. Among these are fellow pastors and ministers, Sunday school teachers and youth leaders. The scale of the training varies. In one of the more ambitious applications of the training, 40,000 young persons accessed sexual health information provided by 350 church youth leaders:

"Here's my approach: Once I get back from the training I train my 7 board members. They go with me to my 55-odd circuit directors. These 7 men help me to do the training of the 55 persons. Then we go down now to the churches which were under my charge, which included Cayman - about 350-odd churches. Each year, I have a conference with my board members. I have a conference with the circuit directors and I have a conference with the church youth leaders. The 7 help train the 55. Right there in the training, we identify those who we feel will best be able to help with training the next level - give them a note that will ask them to assist with training the 350; as well as working with their own circuit. Each of the 350-odd church youth leaders could then take the knowledge back to their own young people. To ensure contact with Youth.now, we'd usually ask people from Youth.now to be at the first training then ask for people who had also participated in the Youth.now training sessions to come and help with the other two levels. It means that there are some of my circuit people who now have their own direct links into Youth.now."

(Pastor, New Testament Church of God)

The number of requests for technical and financial assistance received by the project from pastors and their administrations is evidence that pastors are keen to adopt the new approach to CFLE. Requests to the project have increased more than six fold in the period since the first training.



### ii) National Level

Impacting pre-service training of pastors and church leaders was not an explicit focus of the Youth.now intervention. However, the CFLE material is finding its way into several pre-service training programmes in bible colleges, Christian education institutes and seminaries and impacting the knowledge and attitudes of student pastors.

### Denominational Bonds... A matter of perspective

Collaboration between the trained pastors is not always embraced. We are reminded in the following quote that in our effort to move CFLE forward there are denominational and doctrinal issues that must be respected:

"Most churches would rather relate to their own church family,"

he contends.

"Each denomination perceives its own values, while we might have general values; but they would feel more comfortable having a person from their own religious belief coming in to talk with their young people. Because I wouldn't necessarily like somebody outside of the Seventh Day Adventists to come in to teach my young people about sex, because there are some churches that have different views."

(Pastor, SDA)

This view was also expressed by a Senior Divisional Director for Education from another denomination:

"Each denomination is going to have its own particular perspective on certain issues, so it is material that is better covered by the denomination itself. .... But you could link it back, because having brought us together for the production of a manual such as this, you already have a consensus; so it is for the individual churches now to do the training exercises for their clergy on the basis of their theology and understanding."

### Networking and Sharing: There is Strength in Unity

Nevertheless, graduates are open to interdenominational collaboration and sharing, as a result practical collaborations between denominations have emerged and are being strengthened. One such is the National Christian Youth Coalition (NCYC), a relational coalition formed in 1998. Members share the mission of networking and partnering for youth discipleship as well as resources because, as the founding chairman notes,

"..... it's not all there in one denomination and we've recognised that."

Youth.now provides each batch of graduates with a complete class list of graduates' names, affiliation and contact information.

"We get a lot of calls from various denominations who need a speaker or a resource. WLM is into kingdom, not church. The kingdom of God is made up of people, not institutions that we have built....."

(Pastor, Whole Life Ministries)

"At the training, that was one of the things that was emphasized, not by the trainers, but by ourselves left with an open understanding that if I don't think that this is my area of expertise, or if I need someone to validate what I have said to my membership, I am going to call on you. So we left with a spirit of cooperation and ecumenism."

(Pastor, Anglican Church)

Another innovative approach to sharing and networking is through a website developed by a Baptist youth minister. She provides the following rationale for using the Internet:

"I thought it would have been a good idea, seeing that there were so many people involved in the training-of-trainers."

she says.

"Yahoo offers websites where you can go ahead and start any kind of group that you want, so I put all the files together - most of the things that we learnt from the seminar pertaining to adolescent, be it drugs, sex or anything related to that. I documented it so that anybody at all who wanted the information could go on that site and retrieve it. And I thought it would be a good way for all the other people who were trained to keep in contact with each other, plus adolescents who wanted to retrieve the information could also go on and also get in contact with persons about issues that they are concerned with."

The site also offers a chat room facility, because, as she says:

"At times people are afraid to sit before someone else and discuss their issues so, to me, this might be something to make it a little easier for some people who are shy and afraid."

Although small, she is optimistic and is continues to promote the site.

### What of the Adolescents?

This component of the intervention has not been evaluated. However, anecdotally, and from observation of a few graduates conducting sessions and interacting with youth in and outside of their churches, it is evident that pastors trained in CFLE by Youth.now are comfortable discussing sexual health and CFLE issues. In the matter of safer sex, abstinence is the key message advanced by the church leaders. The leaders interviewed were consistent in that view.

"When you look in Genesis, it was something that was given to us, and God said when he created that, it was good."

he notes.

"And that is the message that I want to relate to our adolescents; that sex is good but there's a context that it needs to happen in, after you have explored a lot of understanding of yourself. From a Christian perspective we say to them 'abstain'; and interestingly, that's the message that we're getting from everybody now... Wait until you understand yourself before you get involved, because there are other issues that can really throw you off."

(Pastor, Whole Life Ministries)

None of the pastors interviewed promote condoms use or distribute condoms. They will refer sexually active adolescent to public health sources. Pastors lament the absence of organised abstinence programmes for adolescents. Without this element, the CFLE Programme for adolescents is incomplete.

"You keep saying abstain, abstain, abstain, but how do you do that? The how of it is becoming more of a discussion now, so I feel we are coming around to the real thing - the how to do this thing."

(Pastor, New Testament Church of God)

## Conclusion

The need for the church to be an active participant in the response to HIV/AIDS is real.

"It is really a big issue. Sometimes you find that people within the church don't want to discuss the issue; but while we are not discussing it, it's reality. Kids are having children and kids are having diseases that they are afraid to discuss."

(Female Youth Minister)

The challenge is how to engage with the church in ways that help refocus from the "Fall Theology" to an "Image Theology" - one that teaches adolescents that they have worth and dignity and that they have the potential to function responsibly, to achieve excellence.

Through the process the project has —

- been able to impact perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of pastors who have been trained;
- created a critical mass of change agents within the community of faith; and
- influenced the environment to enhance support for ARH through the added support of the faith community.

There is evidence that theologians, pastors and church youth ministers and leaders exposed to the intervention better understand ARH issues and have committed themselves to individual and collective action. They realise that the church, as an agent of social change, has a vital role in facilitating both the spiritual and social well-being of society. The pastors have demonstrated that, irrespective of denominational, doctrinal and other labels, they can work together to support the health sector in its HIV/AIDS prevention effort.



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